

Minutes
Community Voices/Budget Choices Facilitation Committee
June 12, 2008

The committee met at the Jones Library. The meeting was called to order at 9:05 a.m.

Alison Donta-Venman, Katherine Vorwerk Feldman, Stanley Gawle, Martha Hanner, Irvin Rhodes, and Bob Saul were present from the committee, as was Andrew Steinberg, Budget Coordinating Group liaison to the committee.

Bonnie Isman (Library Director), John Musante (Assistant Town Manager and Finance Director) and Alisa Brewer (Select Board) were also present.

Agenda

1. Presentation by Alisa Brewer, the public engagement process for “Planning Amherst Together” and the lessons for reaching out to our community and engaging it in planning
2. Preliminary work to design the public engagement phase of the process and a citizens outreach committee
3. Review the committee work plan
4. Consider whether to meet Burt Wolff
5. Approval of minutes, May 15, May 21, May 28
6. Consideration of how the committee will function – subcommittees, chair, support.

Steinberg chaired the meeting by agreement of the committee. Isman described the process to develop scenarios for the libraries. She is consulting with Musante to assure consistency. Musante explained that the schools, libraries and town are making common assumptions regarding payroll benefits, utilities, and other areas where it is possible.

The committee discussed the need to be able to answer questions from the public about the assumptions regarding the cost for scenario options as we seek their input. There was discussion about unfunded benefits for current and future retirees, including pensions and health insurance. This is in the category of a possible “long-term budget buster.”

There was brief discussion about asking another consultant who assists with planning processes to meet with the committee. The committee was amenable to meeting with Wolff. Steinberg asked Rhodes whether he had asked Wolff if he would donate services as an Amherst resident. Rhodes did not specifically ask Wolff.

Alisa Brewer described her observations about public engagement in the Master Planning process and the differences between that process and this one. This process is not as large and will be completed in a shorter period. She sees this committee needing to take more of a leadership role to present information and options. An outreach committee can be helpful. It should be small and composed of people who are willing to work. Clare Bertrand led the outreach effort for the master planning process and had to consider clusters of interests and the time line for the process. Brewer said that it was always a challenge to have the materials ready for the public meetings. She advised that we not do a lot of presentation, since the goal is to hear

from people. We might consider paired sessions, day and evening, to accommodate different schedules. She said that it is difficult to plan meetings for every precinct. The committee can offer small group presentations. PTO's are helpful but they are generally composed of middle class home owners. The challenge is to get beyond that group.

Brewer suggested that we consider a web presence to convey information, and use group e-mail. It is advisable to obtain e-mail addresses from people as they attend meetings to enable follow-up. She also suggested that we work with ACTV to tape meetings for broadcast and develop a media strategy, such as a relationship with the Bulletin, Gazette and Republican. Press releases will get published. The committee can ask for a column in the Bulletin. Brewer does not recommend paper mail due to cost. Information can be posted and available at libraries, Town Hall, and the Bangs Center. She suggests that it not be more than two sides of a paper. It is difficult to provide translation to every language, but we can offer to have someone translate individually as requested.

Brewer recommends that the public meetings have structure. Group facilitators need to be trained about the structure and the need to stay on time. There needs to be an organized feedback sheet. She did not recommend another survey. She also reminded the committee that there is a difference between feedback about the session and the end product. It is important to have substance at meetings and a product from the meeting. People come to a meeting to do something. Advance materials with a clear picture of the choices will be helpful.

Providing advance notice of outreach events is helpful, as much as 6 weeks for saving dates. The committee also discussed the work plan and time line, and what needs to happen to complete our work. This includes receiving and analyzing information in order to develop scenarios (alternative pictures of the future) to present to the public, public education, engagement and feedback, and the development of a multi-year financial plan reflecting the public's input. With this daunting challenge, the six members present suggested that we organize as subcommittees.

The committee then discussed its need for subcommittees to do the work it needs to do. They included five subcommittees: data analysis; presentation; media (including working with Town IT staff to develop web presence); outreach and public engagement; and a coordination subcommittee to continue to develop and monitor the work plan and time line.

Donta-Venman, Gawle, and Hanner volunteered for the data analysis committee. Saul volunteered to start immediately on developing a presentation format. Vorwerk-Feldman and Rhodes expressed interest in the work plan and time line.

The members present decided to formalize the process with motions at future meetings. They also agreed that it needs to select a chair.

Steinberg agreed to send a memo to all committee members asking that they consider whether the designation of subcommittees is correct, they identify the ones where they have interest or qualifications, and that they think about what you want to discuss with Rod Wright regarding public engagement processes when we meet with him on June 19.

The meeting adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

Andrew Steinberg, acting clerk